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ABSTRACT

The causes of stress for college senior-level administrators and their coping approaches were studied, based on discussions with 60 administrators from 44 institutions in the United States and England. Four sources of stress were identified: stress from the general environment, stress from job-related but external sources, stress from internal and/or psychological sources, and stress stemming from student encounters. The administrators adopt an attitude of reality acceptance toward the external dimensions of stress, be they general to the environment (e.g., wider political or social developments), or higher-education related but external to the institution (e.g., a state regulation or collective-bargaining contract). It is the internal/psychological and student-related stressors that they attempt to address. Six types of coping mechanisms include: development of a healthy lifestyle, development of personal and professional support systems, adoption of effective time management techniques, perception of change as challenge, development of a stress game plan, and development of a positive attitude. Developing a healthy lifestyle alone does not eliminate stress, but it helps people cope and provides a base for further strategies. Developing a positive attitude toward life and work is recognized as the best strategy for dealing with stress. (SW)

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TAKING STRESS IN STRIDE:
How Do College Administrators Cope?

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by Frank A. Bucci

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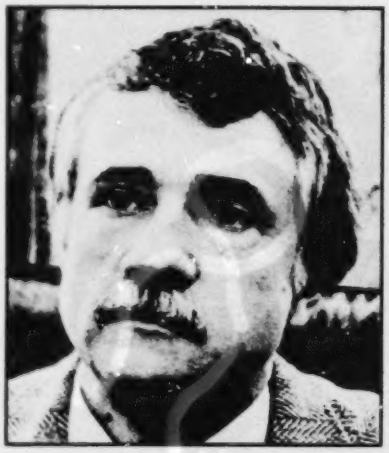
What causes stress and how do senior administrators manage it?

To get at these questions, I spoke at length during the past year with 60 administrators from 44 institutions in this country and England. These people are indeed under stress, by their own universal report. Most have at least a passing knowledge of the literature on stress, know its warning signs and effects, and are looking to develop appropriate coping mechanisms. A few people claim they welcome stress and even thrive on it.



As vice president for student affairs at Kutztown University and former president of the East Penn School Board, Frank A. Bucci is no stranger to stress. This article is based on a study he conducted to determine the causes of stress for academic administrators.

The Sources of Stress

At least four sources of stress are identifiable to most administrators: stress from the general environment; stress from job-related but external sources; stress from internal and/or psychological sources; and stress stemming from student encounters.

Quite properly, administrators focus on coping with the latter two stress sources, since they are internal and subject to control. They adopt an attitude of reality acceptance toward the external dimensions of stress, be they general to the environment (wider political or social developments, for example) or higher-education related but external to the institution (a state regulation or collective-bargaining contract, for example). It is the internal/psychological and student-related stressors that they attempt to deal with.

Internal/Psychological Stressors

The rapidity of decision-making required by normal day-to-day functions causes stress. Emergencies are commonplace, crises disrupt daily schedules, and the unexpected comes to be expected. Many administrators describe overreactions to emergencies and crises by local constituencies and by their presidents and the stress that follows from such overreaction.

Interaction with colleagues, particularly people who are perceived to be insensitive to and/or unappreciative of the contribution of the administrator, can be highly stressful. Perhaps this is a characteristic of schisms and territoriality on campuses. The debilitating effect of splits between faculty, middle management, senior-level administrators, and student affairs personnel is present on most campuses as a constant source of stress.

A number of administrators report that their own staff members are a source of stress for them. It is difficult to encourage staff to adjust to changes and accept new roles and expectations, and to supervise and evaluate marginally qualified, though tenured, personnel. Particularly vexing is the need to solve problems of subordinates' interpersonal relationships with other staff members. Senior-level administrators find themselves falling prey to the "septic tank syndrome" where subordinates place their own problems on their supervisor's desks for solution. Subordinates also bring into the office expectations that cannot be met, whether for fiscal or philosophic reasons. The discrepancy between responsibility assigned by the college and authority delegated to the administrator can also lead to stress. Some report frustration with attempts to make the institution more student-oriented, even as they must deal with problems caused by staff members who incorrectly accede to student requests.

The defensive accountability that results from the need to defend the many "no win" decisions one makes every day is a common stressor, as is the lack of control over daily agendas, frustrations with prioritizing tasks, difficulty in using time efficiently, and the extremely heavy volume of paperwork.

Student-related Stressors

Chief student affairs officers cite stress resulting from interactions with students, including:

- frustrations with regard to the mores of today's students

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The debilitating effect of splits between faculty, middle management, senior-level administrators, and student affairs personnel is present on most campuses as a constant source of stress.

- impotency in coping with student alcohol issues
- tense interaction with students about "consumerism" and local campus issues
- tensions from determining guilt or innocence and in dispensing sanctions in student disciplinary cases
- difficulties in motivating students to adhere to policies and structures
- persistent student demands for exceptions, waivers, and special privileges
- frustrations in handling the sheer volume and diversity of student personal problems
- tensions resulting from interaction with emotional and psychotic students and their parents.

Some senior administrators have serious personal concerns of a highly stressful nature. They question their own future. They lament the lack of upward and even lateral mobility. A few admitted feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness. Some felt unappreciated in their present roles. A few projected negative self-esteem and expectations for themselves.

Additionally, specters of declining enrollment, budgetary constraints, and fiscal instability haunt a number of campuses and generate considerable stress.

So, there is more than enough stress to go around. What coping mechanicms are senior-level administrators developing to manage it?

Coping with Stress

Cedoline (1982) writes, "Everyone needs to be taught how to deal with stress. We are innoculated against rare diseases, but seldom is attention paid to a much more mortal enemy—distress." The administrators I spoke with are paying attention to that "mortal enemy." Most are familiar with Seliger's (1982) finding that, "Stress causes bursts of adrenalin within the body. If no physical exertion uses up that adrenalin, the excess remains in the bloodstream, can build up cholesterol, and can lead to serious health problems." Two vice-presidents recently were hospitalized for stress-related illness. Escaping such illness is a goal of the others. Many recognize how their bodies react to stress and are familiar with the "fight or flight" response. They know that, while such a response may have served their primitive ancestors well, it has no place in the office today.

While there are as many different coping mechanisms as there are individuals attempting to manage stress, a number are similar and fall into clearly identifiable categories. Six such categories are:

- development of a healthy lifestyle
- development of personal and professional support systems
- adoption of effective time management techniques
- perception of change as challenge
- development of a stress game plan
- development of a positive attitude

A Healthy Lifestyle

The administrators recognize that a body without stamina is a body unable to handle excessive stress. Thus, they are making concerted efforts to live healthy lifestyles. Most have stopped smoking. A number are drinking less alcohol. Many are adopting new diets and reducing the consumption of salt, sugar, red meat, fats, and caffeine. They plan quiet time and schedule days off, weekends away, and vacations. The most striking coping mechanism, however, is a renewed emphasis on exercise. The beneficial effects of exercise, both for relaxation and increased energy, are well understood and many of the administrators make regular and vigorous exercise a regular part of their lives.

Developing a healthy lifestyle alone does not eliminate stress, but it does help people cope and provides a base for further strategies.

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Personal & Professional Support Systems

Another strategy the administrators find useful is the support system concept. They make conscious efforts to cultivate a network of professional people outside their college who can relate to their own job demands. The network provides an outlet for catharsis; letting off steam is accepted and shared. It provides a source of help for professional problems.

The development of a supportive environment of friends and family for social purposes outside the professional position is also common. Most of the administrators I interviewed are developing the ability to leave the job at the office and retreat to the support of family and other personal support systems. Some of the support systems center around hobbies and special interests such as music, painting, photography, and gardening.

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Time Management

Drucker (1967) wrote, "Everything requires time. It is the one truly universal condition. All work takes place in time and uses up time. Yet, most people take for granted this unique, irreplaceable, and necessary resource. Nothing else, perhaps, distinguishes effective executives as much as their tender loving care of time."

The development of a positive, optimistic attitude toward life and work is recognized as the best strategy for dealing with stress.

College and university administrators want to be effective executives and are adopting within their managerial style and daily agenda a number of time-management techniques.

First, they make a conscious effort to avoid procrastination and wasting time. Second, they respect their own time and that of others. They are implementing specific techniques to these ends. One technique that works to relieve stress associated with interactions with subordinates is to train subordinates thoroughly and give them complete jobs to do with goals and directions to reach those goals. Subordinates are expected to do their jobs on time and are given the authority and discretion to see them to completion. Success is found when the staff "buys into" and claims ownership of projects.

Delegating tasks to others saves time. The administrators delegate not only matters of low priority but also those that involve time-consuming detail. Many attempt never to do a job that a subordinate can do as well. This not only relieves supervisor stress but also makes subordinates feel important and improves staff pride and morale.

Many administrators perform the most difficult tasks early in the day and block out large chunks of time for priority matters. They attempt to deal decisively with day-to-day mail and tasks by handling them quickly. Some indicate that they write letters and memos much less frequently and use the phone more often. Many find that time is saved and productivity increased when meetings are reduced in length and number. Each meeting has an agenda and deviations from it are limited. When time is under control, stress is more easily managed.

Change as Challenge

Toffler (1970) wrote, "We induce stress by subjecting people to too much change in too short a time." There is a tendency in higher education to resist change. Those who wish to reduce stress accept its inevitability and perceive it as not necessarily a problem but as a challenge. Kobasa's (1982) research found that healthy people anticipate "changes as interesting incentives rather than threats to security." The administrators interviewed share that view. They are attempting to lessen their resistance to change and to feel less threatened by it. When change is perceived as challenge, stress is reduced.

Developing a Stress Game Plan

Some of the administrators feel that it is possible to develop a stress game plan. Just as an athletic coach develops a game plan and "psyches up" his team for a game, many administrators feel they, too, can get "psyched up" for stress. Merely rehearsing potentially stressful events by visualizing what may occur makes those events easier to handle; one can anticipate questions, mull over options, and develop a "what if the worst happens?" scenario. If the stress game plan also includes alternatives to deal with the worst possible reactions or results from a stressful event, many administrators believe it can reduce the risks and lessen the stress.

A Positive Attitude

The development of a positive, optimistic attitude toward life and work is recognized as the best strategy for dealing with stress. Nearly all of the administrators admit that without the proper attitudinal response to stress, few other coping mechanisms are possible and stress could not otherwise be managed. Some adopt a fatalistic attitude by divorcing themselves emotionally from as many stressful decisions as possible. They find that when issues are not personalized, defensive reactions are reduced. Many have learned to accept their own mistakes and the mistakes of others and have an ability to laugh at themselves. Some refuse to accept guilt for the alleged overwork and/or burnout of staff. Many are attempting to develop a better sense of humor.

The most important "attitudinal" change, however, seems to be efforts to alter the workaholic characteristics that got them where they are but that have become counterproductive. They are making time for fun and recreation. Kinzer (1979) wrote "Fun is a coping mechanism. Unfortunately the Protestant ethic tells us we cannot have fun in our never-ending search for success." Many administrators are finding that it does not have to be so. If before

When change is perceived as challenge, stress is reduced.

they felt they had no time, now they are making time for the diversion and recreation that reduces stress. The alternative is that they may be forced to find time for illness caused by stress later. They are making time for themselves and believe that by putting themselves first they will also be more helpful to others.

The administrators recognize, too, that much of their own stress is self-created by the perceptions they have of certain events. Most seem to agree that it is not so much the events themselves that are stressful, but their own perception and response, and that the latter are controllable. They recognize, for example, that when a colleague's behavior causes stress and that behavior cannot be changed, their own reaction to that behavior can be changed. Thus, stress is reduced.

A Profile

Administrators successful in managing stress have common characteristics. They know when their bodies are under stress. They have changed their diets and living habits. They work at building professional and personal support systems. They make a conscious effort to practice time-management techniques. They perceive change as a challenging incentive. They "psych" themselves up for potentially stressful events. They have developed positive and optimistic attitudes. They have goals and priorities and a strong sense of purpose. In a larger sense, they are in control of their positions and their lives. To the degree that they are in control, they are also successful in reducing their own stress levels. ■

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